

The Value of Alternative Media
Peace Review: Media and Democratic Action
Volume 11 Number 1 March 1999

Dorothy Kidd

In October 1998, the Pacific Centre for Alternative Journalists convened its founding conference in Vancouver Canada. The sixty participants represented a spectrum of media activists -- from community radio, the student, feminist and Central American solidarity press, Latin American, labour and community television alliances, community-based electronic nets, assorted "culture jammers" -- as well as social justice activists from the anti-poverty, student, aboriginal, environmental, and anti-free trade movements. This article is based on my presentation to the opening plenary which was called "What makes alternative media valuable to the communities it serves?"

How are alternative media valuable to the communities they serve? How can we make them even more valuable? Let me start by examining the concept of alternative media and then go on to discuss how far we have come and where we should be going. Alternative media first grew up during the late 1960s and 1970s in the counter-culture movement. And like so much that has come from that generation it is a concept that has been appropriated by corporate marketers. Alternative is now used to sell everything, from music to beer, to a young upscale niche that wants to stand out from the crowd.

So why are we, as media activists, using this term? We could have chosen others, such as community-oriented, progressive, radical, democratic etc. But all of those also have their own baggage. Maybe sometime in the future we will find a better choice. For now, we've chosen *alternative* because it's how we are often characterized and how we characterize ourselves. While the mainstream media tends to think of us as the *other*, alternative journalists often use the term to mean the *opposite*, the counter to mainstream corporate and state media. Many take pride in this stand on the margins, defining themselves in those terms. For example, I work in community radio, which we often describe as the voice of those underrepresented in the mainstream media.

This role of alternative media as unofficial opposition to mainstream media has been crucial to the extension of public discussion and debate about a

wide range of concerns and issues. If alternative media are not the first to break stories, we are usually the first to provide any depth of analysis. For example, I think of the contribution of Paper Tiger Television in the U.S. during the Gulf War. Amidst the blizzard of network military maps and “smart-bomb” talk, and the masses of yellow ribbons, they explored the corporate and state interests of the U.S. and Allied Forces, as well as providing the only evidence of significant opposition by US citizens. Or the e-network that quickly grew out of the cyber-publication of the Zapatista manifesto. The Zapatistas were daring to challenge the North American Free Trade Agreement when much more powerful anti-free trade campaigners in Canada and the U.S. had given up. Alternative media continue to play a crucial role in the war in Chiapas as the Mexican Army’s campaign of low-intensity conflict threatens the massacre of Chiapas citizens. Most recently, alternative media were invaluable in the spread of information, critique, and above all, international networking, among citizen’s groups around the world, who were rallying against the fast-track passing of the MAI, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The mainstream press eventually covered all of these stories. But it was the alternative media that provided the first in-depth coverage and analysis with first-hand information from activists organizing around these issues.

Providing alternative messages and points of view is becoming even more crucial as the global commercial media falls into fewer and fewer corporate hands. The reduction in the diversity of information sources is also exacerbated by the decline in state-supported services, here in Canada with the cuts in support for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), throughout Europe and many other regions. There is a very real danger of our horizon of options being blanked out.

Instead, the television and Internet screens are full of another set of messages. Disney and Fox, Viacom and Conrad Black, are all telling us that there is no alternative. You don’t need to worry about any of your daily crises, your country’s national development priorities, or international food and security. Those kinds of decisions are best left to the capitalist market. Just sit back, get your credit card out, and choose from the commercial options on the screen. Don’t worry about the cuts in your social service safety net or the privatization of your schools and hospitals. All will be efficiently run if you’d just let your state leaders arrange a new credit rating with the bankers in New York, or a loan with the International Monetary Fund. In Europe, this message that *there is no alternative* to the corporate

market has become so commonplace that they've shortened it to "Tina." In this context facing us, alternative media have an even more important role to play.

However, I think we need to rethink our role. We need to continue the critique of the mainstream, but we also need to take a greater part in constructing another vision. How can we make alternative media more proactive, in tune with our own goals and horizons. We can start by focussing on the first part of the word alternative, *to alter or change*. Alternative media are valuable to the communities they serve when they advocate and work for social change in the communities and the larger society. I've borrowed this idea from Peruvian media activist, Rafael Roncagliolo, the most recent President of the World Community Radio Association. Alternative media who are committed to altering society, to social, political and economic change, operate with a different vision from the corporate one, which view people as ever-narrower niches of consumers to be delivered to advertisers.

Underscoring the social change part of alternative also allows us differentiate between alternative media. A whole range of media are described as alternative because they speak to groups who have been misrepresented, or underrepresented, in the mainstream. For example, Black Entertainment TV in the US, or the Chinese-Canadian daily newspapers, or Spanish-language commercial radio. These new services can be important counter voices, but are they alternative? No, not if they do not operate from a vision of altering their communities, but are based on the commercial model. It does not mean that journalists working there might not be supportive, but they're not alternative.

Alternative media also operate from a different model than the state or public services. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was originally set up by an alliance of people who challenged the status quo. However, when it was institutionalized in the mid-1930's, the CBC was mandated to represent the nation state, focussing on national issues which are framed by a professional body of journalists who work in the centers of governmental and corporate power in eastern Canada. Until recently, the CBC operated at arms length from government, as an independent service supported by citizens' taxes. However its mandate is not proactive, to alter society.

In an increasingly market-driven media environment, national state-supported services are certainly worth defending, but they are not alternative. Living now in the United States I tune my radio to the CBC, BBC, and U.S. National Public Radio as often as I can. There are many journalists in these services who are sympathetic to social change issues, a significant number of whom got their professional starts in alternative media. I hope we can continue to work with them. However, they are not the alternative. The CBC relies on a professional corps of journalists who, although more diverse in gender and cultural background, represent the professional or managerial sectors of society, to interpret our stories for us. This second model of media service is like the media equivalent of “representative” democracy.

If corporate media is the first, and state media now the second, alternative media represent the third option, of “direct” democracy. Alternative media are most valuable when they present messages directly from individuals and groups who are working to transform their communities and societies. My examples of news stories have all been from the political sphere, but alternative media have also been valuable in their presentation of social, cultural and economic concerns. I’d like to give you three examples where alternative media has provided the lead, helping to bring the voices out of the underground to wider public recognition.

The first example is the contribution of community radio, and more recently campus radio, to the development of local, national and increasingly international music. (The corporate recording industry recognized this fact and regularly checks the alternative play lists.) Secondly, in the province of British Columbia, where both major corporate publishers support campaigns against aboriginal sovereignty and the resolution of land claims, the different positions of First Nation’s peoples have only been presented in the alternative media. Finally, when the Canadian government threatened to restrict the manufacture and sale of herbal medicines, the successful underground resistance first aired its concerns in the alternative media. Each of these constituencies, of musicians and music fans, aboriginal peoples and allies, and herbal medicine producers and users, are of significant size locally and internationally. However, without access to alternative media, I would not have understood their issues, or the global scope of them.

Five years ago, I argued at Vancouver City Hall that we at Vancouver Cooperative Radio were fostering a civic public sphere. More recently, I

dubbed this third media option the “the global communications commons”. Just as commoners in Europe fought off the enclosures of their common land, media activists today are trying to keep alternative media open and alive in the face of new enclosures of public discourse by corporate media. This maintenance of common spaces for public discussion and debate is no less important for the sustenance of our communities and cultures.

These communications commons are based locally all over the world, and include traditional media forms as well as community-based and pirate radio stations, local video production centers, and cyber-publishers and networkers. From their home bases the local initiatives are starting to link with regional, national and international networks of alternative media. This ad hoc web structure is partly a result of our tremendous lack of resources and funding. However, it is also a tribute to the idea that a grassroots communications network is only sustainable if it connects people working on the ground at the local level.

The “communication commons” presents a very different configuration than the commercial and state media systems. National state broadcasting systems continue to be very centralized, with program production emanating from a central hub. The global commercial systems broadcast all over the world, but most of their “product,” comes from one or two entertainment production centers in the US. While still a small proportion of available media internationally, altogether alternative media represent a very different horizon. Rather than seeing ourselves as marginal, we can help change the map and demonstrate a much larger plurality of the world’s people. It is a continuance of the vision of the New World Information and Communication Order, first proposed in the 1970s by the Non-Aligned states. However, it has developed because of the strength of the local groups who sustain the networks.

Alternative media have also made a major contribution at the organizational level when they have attempted to democratize their own internal structures. Inadequate and unfinished as these processes may be, alternative media groups have modelled less hierarchical and more horizontal ways of working together. They have altered the traditional hierarchies of public speech, in which the mikes and monitors have been dominated by men, people of European heritage and training, and most of all, the professional classes. Challenged to live up to their promise to represent all the voices, a wide

range of groups now have a much greater say in cultural production and in governance.

If the first part of alternative is *alter*, the last part of the word alternative is *native*. Alternative media is valuable when it is native to the communities it serves. (It is no accident that I use this word on this continent of the Americas, where indigenous peoples have fought to create their own alternative media.) Alternative media grow, like native plants, in the communities they serve, allowing spaces to generate historical memories and analyses, nurture visions for their futures, and weed out the representations of the dominant media. They do this through a wide combination of genres, from news, storytelling, conversation and debate to music in local vernaculars. This growing of cultures is especially important when we're saturated with the homogenous packaging of global consumer culture.

Sometimes this heterogeneity and diversity can seem strange, or even unsettling. It's not always smooth or pretty to hear and see productions from cultures other than your own, whether of youth, or indigenous peoples, or women, or lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered peoples. However, I think this opportunity for communication across cultures is one of the greatest potentials of alternative media. As a radio producer, I have often heard from listeners who were not part of the audience we thought we were addressing. Much of the time, these listeners -- the men who called the women's programmes, or the Euro-Canadians to those of young people of colour, or the heterosexuals to queer discussions -- were appreciative of the opportunity to listen to conversations where they were not usually included.

As an older, whiter listener, I have found it invaluable to have access to self-representations from communities that are not my own. It's given me insights into many different ways of seeing, providing more information to think about issues and challenging my mainstream-fed perceptions. As a North American, it's made me aware of the richness and diversity of cultures from other regions, and, at the same time, more awake to the dangers of the growing gulf in wealth, political and media power, that looms between us.

At the same time, as indigenous elders have been trying to tell us for five hundred years, we need to recognize our interdependency. For our survival, each and everyone of us needs to be able to speak and to listen to all the voices. This recognition that free speech requires the right to freedom of

expression, and to information from a plurality of sources and of media, that is driving the international campaign for the “right to communicate.” A worldwide network of alternative media and of groups organizing for more democratic communication are circulating The People’s Communication Charter which calls for greater access to diversity of information, the right to use the airwaves and communication resources and for their democratic and transparent management.

What would make alternative media more valuable to the communities it serves? Alternative media continue to have huge challenges ahead. Day to day survival is of course the most pressing concern of most groups. However, unless we have a much larger vision, how can we ask our communities to support us? I’m going to briefly highlight a few suggestions.

Orienting our work with the aim of proactive social change, one of our first tasks is to improve our understanding of the changing context and our representation of what is going on. While most of us are based locally, we also network regionally, nationally and internationally. We need to foster stronger connections with people in our communities who are involved in cultural, political, social and economic change. How can we be more strategic about helping to build those networks?

Producing media to help alter our communities also means re-positioning ourselves as media activists. It means offering more support to groups and campaigns that want to extend the reach of their work to the mainstream media. In the same way, it means rethinking our relationships with journalists and producers in the mainstream media. When we stop focussing on ourselves as marginal, and begin to strategize how to use media for social change, we can begin to make alliances with other media people based on strength, and not on our resentments about being treated like the poorer cousins.

In order to get our messages out, we also need to recognize and utilize the new media convergences. How can we creatively use these new technologies to strengthen connections between journalists and producers? At one time, print, radio, television and video were quite separate and had their own aesthetics and production sub-cultures. But now the reasons for those divisions are breaking down. How can we develop greater convergence between media activists of all kinds, as well as social movements who need to develop their own alternative media for their campaigns?

While I am suggesting we become more strategic about using our media skills and resources, I'm not suggesting that we only speak to the converted. We also need to change and improve our ways of presenting our work. We work with the challenge of a media-saturated environment in which the majority of people, and particularly the younger generations, are very knowledgeable about media forms and genres. We also need to acknowledge the ways that the majority of people use media as part of the multi-tasking complex of their day. Their own use of media and their work as consumers have helped them develop sophisticated understandings of the media. How can we work more creatively to address our audiences?

Improving our production goes hand in hand with finding out more about our audiences. Our research needs to go beyond counting heads, to ask people what sense they're making from our programming and writing. What themes do they want us to cover, what debates and discussions really need more airing, what is enriching and sustaining their lives? How can we develop a more responsive and playful relationship with the communities we serve?

Secondly, what would it mean to make alternative media more native to the communities they serve? For a start, I think it means continuing to support the development of production groups native to communities of all kinds and sizes. Doesn't this just reinforce the division into smaller and smaller groups? I think this is one of the biggest challenges we face. Too often we have accepted the mainstream strategy of "niche" fragmentation. It's been easier, especially in the relatively media-privileged environments of North America and western Europe, to avoid dealing with the conflicts between groups by setting up new media services. Rather than challenge the traditional hierarchies of power, every new group has just been provided with, or staked out a special journal issue, new broadcast program or website. This may have increased diversity overall, but it has also led to a form of media ghettoization and to a fragmentation of our audiences. There is far too little communication among groups, or translation of what each group is saying to the other communities.

The divisions among us are very real. We haven't created the gaps of economic, political and cultural power. However, if we are to effectively share our limited communications resources, we need to proactively work to heal the rifts. It's not an either or process. We need to continue to support

the efforts of groups with less power to create their own cultural spaces and actively work to build bridges between autonomous groups. At the same time we need to seriously consider ways to interrupt the sub-cultural monologues and create moments for dialogue and arguments across movements and audiences. How can we create information programs that are really multi-lingual and multi-cultural? We need to build on past attempts and make this bridging a priority, figuring out ways to support one another and to provide opportunities for exchange, dialogue and debate, developing channels that support our interdependence.

We're not alone. In the last few years, groups such as the Pacific Centre for Alternative Journalists have been bridging these professional divides in sectoral and regional meetings throughout the world. Alliances of media activists, critics and allies, such as the Union for Democratic Communication or the Media and Democracy Congresses in the U.S. have formed in every region of the world. There have also been meetings of indigenous media activists, particularly in the Americas and Australia, of women media workers and activists, especially in Asia and Latin America, and of labor communicators. In 1998, international participants in conferences in Vienna and El Salvador echoed the call of the People's Communication Charter for a World Congress on Media and Communication. While we have our work to develop here in the Pacific Region, I know that we can play a part in this growing global social movement for democratic communication.

Further Reading

The Cuscatlan Charter. (1998) Communication Resource: A Supplement to Action Newsletter of the World Association for Christian Communication.

Kidd, Dorothy. (1998) Talking the Walk: The Communications Commons amidst the Media Enclosures. Ph.D. Dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada.

Roncagliolo, Rafael. (1991) Notes on "The Alternative" in Thede, Nancy and Alain Ambrosi (Eds.) Video the Changing World. Montreal/New York: Black Rose Books.

Dorothy Kidd has worked as a producer of community radio and video in Toronto, Vancouver and northern Canada. She is presently teaching Media Studies at the University of San Francisco.